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Congressional bill seeks to amend the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act



PHOTO: U.S. Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, D-Ariz. with Navajo-Hopi Land Commission members Council Delegates Duane Tsinigine, Jonathan Nez, Lorenzo Curley, Alton Joe Shepherd, Dwight Witherspoon, and Walter Phelps.

WINDOW ROCK – On July 9, U.S. Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, D-Ariz., introduced H.R. 5039, a bill seeking to amend Public Law 93-531. This Navajo Technical Amendments Act of 2014 amends the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act to make changes that would foster development and efficiency on the part of the relocation program, and expedite rehabilitation of the Former Bennett Freeze Lands.

The Navajo-Hopi Land Commission has worked with Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, D-Ariz., to address the unique needs of the Former Bennett Freeze Area and other critical issues directly relating to the families impacted by the Navajo Hopi Land Settlement Act.

"I am very proud of the work of the commission and the work of Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick in putting forth this legislation that will help the complicated issue which the commission has

been addressing over the years," said Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) who chairs the NHLC. "This will start an important dialogue and bring a focus back to these Navajo communities who suffer from the harsh consequences of relocation and construction freezes."

H.R. 5039 proposes six technical amendments to the existing law:

1. Clarifies the boundary of the Navajo Nation for land selection purposes. The bill provides clarity so that all the Navajo Nation's trust lands are included within the definition of the reservation for this purpose.
2. Allows for the deselection and reselection of lands to correct a BLM surveying error to allow the Nation to deselect and reselect lands subject to the restrictions in the Act.
3. The bill will require the secretary to evaluate the fee setting process and create a plan for bringing rental determinations current.
4. Create a Navajo Tribal Sovereignty Empowerment Demonstration Project. The Navajo Nation seeks to exercise more sovereignty over its lands and spur economic development and streamline the regulatory process by waiving certain federal laws, while keeping in place their Navajo equivalents, for the limited purposes of renewable energy, housing, public and community facilities, and infrastructure development (limited to 150,000 acres in identified zones).
5. Allow Navajo families living on Hopi partitioned land to relinquish their accommodation agreements and restore their eligibility for relocation benefits.
6. The Act established the Navajo Rehabilitation Trust Fund to provide monies to the Navajo Nation to address the adverse impacts of Federal relocation of Navajo families. This bill releases the Navajo Nation from the obligation to repay these monies and reauthorizes the Trust Fund, allowing Congress to appropriate development dollars in future years should it so choose. The bill has been referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources.

A hearing on the legislation has not yet been announced.

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